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A descriptive account of victims' behaviour and responses in sexually exploitative interactions with offenders

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ABSTRACT

Transcripts of chat logs of sexually exploitative interactions between offenders and victims that took place via Internet communication platforms were analysed to develop our understanding of this phenomenon from the perspective of the victim. The aim of the study was to examine victims' behaviour and responses to approaches by offenders, as well as to ascertain victims' motivation for their engagement. The data set comprised five cases, amounting to 29 transcripts, and was analysed using qualitative thematic analysis. Additionally, police reports were reviewed for descriptive and case-specific information. All offenders were men aged between 27 and 52. Victims were both female ($n = 17$) and male ($n = 6$), and were aged between 11 and 15. Our findings highlight that while the majority of young people in this sample appeared to engage in such interactions for reasons of curiosity and sexual exploration/experimentation, other cases involved serious offences of sexual abuse. The victims in these cases presented with a number of vulnerability factors. Findings are discussed in light of conceptualising young people's negative online experiences along a continuum.

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Online sexual grooming; sexual abuse; victims; sexual exploitation; young people

Introduction

Research on the sexual exploitation and abuse of children that takes place via Internet communication platforms is sparse and predominantly focuses on this phenomenon from an offender perspective. More recently, a number of research studies have emerged that specifically examine sexually exploitative interactions by focusing on the victims. The European Online Grooming Project (Webster et al., 2012) identified three groups of young people based on their behaviour and responses to approaches by offenders in such interactions: (a) resilient, (b) risk-taking, and (c) vulnerable. Although the identification of these groups was based on offender interviews, they highlight that some young people are able to deal with such approaches well; however, that there is a group of young people who present as vulnerable and/or engage in risk-taking behaviours. To date, no research exists that has used real-world data in the form of transcripts

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of chat logs in order to examine in detail such behaviour and responses, which is the focus of the study presented here.

Risk-taking behaviours that have been associated with online victimisation in the literature are: (a) giving/sending out personal information; (b) using the Internet and chat rooms frequently; (c) using the Internet with a mobile phone; (d) communicating with individuals met online; (e) having a close online relationship; and (f) engaging in sexual talk/behaviour online (Bryce, 2010; Livingstone & Haddon, 2009; Mitchell, Finkelhor, & Wolak, 2007; Whittle, Hamilton-Giachritsis, & Beech, 2013). Furthermore, Quayle, Jonsson, and Lööf (2012) conducted interviews with victims, who described that feelings of something being wrong or missing from their lives motivated these young people to go online in the hope it would improve or resolve things. The authors suggest that such feelings may be indicative of vulnerability, either in the form of problematic experiences in the past or current sentiments of not being listened to or understood, as well as a need to explore sexuality in a way that cannot be fulfilled offline.

Whittle, Hamilton-Giachritsis, and Beech (2014a) identified a number of risk factors that appeared to increase a young person's vulnerability to sexual grooming and abuse via Internet communication platforms, and were particularly related to a loss of family protection and parental monitoring, as well as risk-taking behaviour online. Specifically, three groups of young people were revealed: (a) those who presented with long-term vulnerabilities both online and offline; (b) those who became vulnerable following a trigger event that removed protective factors (e.g. family illness, bereavement); and (c) those who had a number of protective factors in the physical world but engaged in risk-taking behaviour online, either because they failed to perceive/minimised the level of risk or as a means of entertainment. Whittle et al. (2014a) noted that while individual risk factors do not automatically make a young person vulnerable, it is the combination and/or accumulation thereof that increase their vulnerability, particularly in the absence of protective factors.

Further risk factors revealed in the literature that may make young people more vulnerable to negative experiences online are: (a) being female; (b) being an older adolescent (14–17 years); (c) being gay, bisexual, or unsure about sexual orientation; (d) having family and school problems (e.g. poor relationship with parents and peers); and (e) having psychological problems (e.g. loneliness, depression, physical/sexual abuse experiences, substance use) (Mishna, McLuckie, & Saini, 2009; Mitchell, Finkelhor, & Wolak, 2001; Wolak, Finkelhor, & Mitchell, 2004; Wolak, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2003).

In terms of the impact of experiences of online sexual grooming and abuse on victims, Whittle et al. (2013) found that young people who presented with a range of individual, familial and peer vulnerability factors long-term, and an absence of protective factors, suffered a greater negative impact than those who had some form of protection in place (at an individual, familial, peer or community level). Those whose protective factors (e.g. a supportive family environment) were weakened as a result of a trigger event, which then led to them becoming more vulnerable, suffered some negative impact; however, when their protective factors were restored (i.e. re-establishment of a supportive family environment) this contributed to their recovery from the negative experience, and facilitated the development of resilience and adaptive coping mechanisms. Victims predominantly reported negative consequences in the form of psychological and physical impact (e.g. embarrassment, depression, self-harm), and the fact that the memory of the abuse is something that will remain with them for the rest of their lives. Some victims also reported difficulties in

relationships with their partners or family members following the abuse. Whittle et al. (2013) further identified complexities faced by victims of online sexual abuse, such as the abuse taking place in their own home (due to the computer's location), resulting in a constant reminder thereof and a violation of their safe space, as well as the possibility of images being distributed and permanently available on the Internet.

While the consideration of risk and vulnerability factors provides important insight into why some young people may be at an increased likelihood of being approached by an offender, and experience online sexual grooming and abuse at their hands, research on behaviours engaged in by victims and their responses to offenders' advances as part of sexually exploitative interactions is currently lacking. Whittle, Hamilton-Giachritsis, and Beech (2015) compared victim and offender perspectives in such cases, using qualitative interviews. Although the female victim–male offender dyads disagreed most commonly in relation to the sexual aspects of the interactions, these victims tended to believe that they were in a relationship with the offender, unlike the male victims and those who did not progress to meet with offenders in the physical world (Whittle, Hamilton-Giachritsis, & Beech, 2014b). However, the study was based on retrospective accounts, relying on victims' and offenders' recollections, which may have been subject to social desirability.

The aim of the present study was therefore to provide a descriptive account of any apparent behaviours engaged in and reactions displayed by victims as part of sexually exploitative interactions with offenders that took place via Internet communication platforms, by analysing transcripts of chat logs of such interactions. These represent naturally occurring, conversational data that are true representations of one's actions in a particular context online. While it is acknowledged that the anonymity of the Internet allows users to adopt online identities/personas (Cooper, 1998), such data do provide insight into the dynamics involved in offender–victim interactions, which is anticipated to significantly contribute to our understanding thereof, as well as shed further light on young people's responses to offenders' advances online.

Method¹

Context

The study presented here forms part of a research project that explores the phenomenon of online sexual grooming and abuse of children that takes place via Internet communication platforms mainly from an offender perspective. Data used in this research consist of transcripts of chat logs and police reports, and were provided by three UK police forces. All case material was anonymised by designated officers at each police force prior to it being made available to the researcher. The research was granted ethical approval by the Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics Ethical Review Committee at the University of Birmingham, UK. Additionally, the researcher received vetting clearance to undertake research activities as part of the Child Exploitation Investigation Team at a UK police force.

Sample and data

Five case series were identified and selected by the police forces involved, based on meeting the criteria of the offender having committed (a) an offence of sexual grooming

under Section 15 of the Sexual Offences Act 2003 (Home Office, 2003), or (b) any other offence under the Sexual Offences Act 2003 that included sexual grooming. Cases comprised of a total of 29 transcripts of chat logs that were retrieved as part of police investigations. Police reports were provided in addition to the transcripts. The number of available transcripts per case varied and ranged from 2 to 12 ($M = 5.8$, $SD = 3.6$).

Participants

Offenders were male and aged between 27 and 52 ($M = 33.6$, $SD = 5.6$). The number of victims with whom offenders communicated ranged from 1 to 12 ($M = 4.6$, $SD = 4.5$), amounting to a total of 23 victims, who were aged between 11 and 15 ($M = 13.00$, $SD = 1.2$). Seventeen victims were female and six victims were male. For the interaction between one of the offenders and a female victim that resulted in a contact sexual offence no transcript of chat logs could be retrieved, resulting in 22 interactions available for analysis.

Procedure

The data were analysed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is 'a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data' (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79) across a data set. This method allows for meaningful elements or codes to be combined to generate themes and explanatory models (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012). The steps undertaken to ensure a rigorous thematic analysis of the study's data follow recommendations by Braun and Clarke (2006), Guest et al. (2012), and Robson (2011). Following the analysis of the transcripts, police reports were consulted for descriptive information about the identified victims.

Ethical considerations

Due to issues surrounding confidentiality and to protect the identity of victims within the interactions analysed as part of this study, no extracts will be presented. Although this potentially results in a loss of depth in the presentation of the results, the imperative for victim protection arguably supersedes the benefit of such an approach. The following section will therefore present the findings in a descriptive manner in an attempt to illustrate the role of victims within sexually exploitative interactions that took place via Internet communication platforms, focusing on different aspects apparent therein: (a) initial contact, (b) conversational topics, (c) relationship aspects, (d) victim responses and behaviour, (e) secrecy of contact, and (f) victim vulnerabilities.

Results

Setting the scene: initial contact

Almost all ($n = 22$) victims were approached by offenders via Internet communication platforms that are popular among young people. These were either public chat rooms or social networking sites. Within the first lines of conversations in Cases 1, 2, and 3, offenders and victims can be seen to acknowledge each other, suggesting that they have previously

communicated and that initial contact was established via a public chat room, with conversations being moved to a private instant messaging provider. In Cases 4 and 5, however, transcripts of chat logs strongly suggest that the first contact making between offenders and victims took place via social networking sites.

Key aspects of victims' engagement and their responses to offenders' either *indirect* or more *direct approaches*,² employed in order to achieve their compliance to engage in sexually explicit interactions, are described in the following sections.

Theme 1: Getting to know each other

Interactions between victims ($n = 5$) and offenders who employed more of an indirect approach (Cases 1 and 2) featured aspects of relationship-building and a range of conversational topics. These involved victims telling offenders about school, hobbies and leisure time activities, but also about their family and relationships, and mainly formed part of general conversation making in response to questions by offenders. More specifically, one victim in Case 1 and the victim in Case 2 appeared to see the offender as a friend or someone they could talk to, and spoke to them about a relationship break-up and personal problems. These conversational topics were usually initiated by victims and involved little questioning by offenders. Features of the offender having taken on somewhat of a role of a friend could also be seen in instances where victims sought advice regarding sexual matters and clothing in terms of what to wear. Interactions in the other three cases were of a predominantly sexual nature and generally lacked conversational topics, demonstrating more of a direct approach.

Theme 2: Seeking assurance regarding relationship status

Most notably, the victim in Case 2 attempted to establish the exclusivity of the relationship with the offender and his feelings towards her relatively early on in the interaction by querying what he thinks when he talks to or thinks of her, and what his thoughts would be in relation to meeting up. She thereby appeared to elucidate the offender's seriousness about the relationship and whether the feeling was mutual. When the offender replied by saying that a meeting would be a long way off due to her age, the victim challenged the relationship by highlighting that the offender knew a lot about her and she did not know very much about him, inviting him to tell more about himself. This is followed by instances of the victim seeking (re-)assurance that the offender is in fact 'okay' with the age gap and 'really loves her'. The victim also enquired about whether the offender wants children when he is older, referring to the two of them having a relationship a couple of years in the future. Not only do such instances suggest an awareness of issues surrounding age of consent, they also illustrate the victim's naivety, young age, and vulnerability in her assessment of the offender's motives and intentions. A description of apparent victim vulnerabilities will be presented in a following section.

Theme 3: Levels of engagement

A number of differences in victims' level of engagement were revealed across cases. Notably, sexually explicit talk was not as prominent in interactions in Case 1, where the

offender employed a more indirect, conversational approach and sexual topics mainly involved fantasy enactment of meeting. Victims in the other cases frequently engaged in sexually explicit talk with offenders and showed their faces on webcam. Offenders' requests for victims to expose body parts, however, were particularly challenged by victims in Cases 4 and 5 in light of the offender not showing himself via webcam. Victims in Case 5 ($n = 2$) also enquired whether the offender had a webcam and requested for him to get/purchase one, as well as send a (sexual) picture. In Cases 2 and 3, webcam use was part of the interaction throughout, with every chat session being initiated by it and accompanying both conversations and online sexual activity.

Reasons given by victims in Cases 4 and 5 for not engaging in webcam use were: (a) being in a public place, (b) not having a webcam/webcam being broken/webcam being in use by another family member, (c) being in someone's company, and (d) not looking good. These may have been genuine reasons or 'excuses' used by victims to get out of doing something they did not want to/feel comfortable with in a non-confrontational manner. Such verbal communication resembles the linguistic phenomenon of 'face-saving' (Thomas, 1995). 'Face-saving' relates to communications that are either threatening to (i.e. face-threatening) or protecting of (i.e. face-saving) the hearer's self-image (in this case the offender). They are therefore forms of indirectness that represent more subtle non-compliance. Sometimes webcam use failed due to technological problems, and other times victims simply refused to show themselves via webcam.

With regards to offenders' requests to engage in online sexual activity, a number of victims ($n = 13$) in Cases 4 and 5 predominantly presented as non-compliant. They either did not respond at all, told offenders that they were not in the mood or up for it, said 'no', reminded offenders that they were in a relationship, explained that they were not interested, or challenged offenders to the point of leaving the conversation. Three interactions featured changes in victims' behaviour following offenders' use of manipulation (e.g. compliments, persistence/persuasion, threats to leave the conversation if victims did not comply), from initially being non-engaging to showing their faces.

Furthermore, of the five victims who complied with showing themselves via webcam, all remained assertive and refused to expose any body parts. A couple of victims repeatedly stated that they were more interested to engage in conversation with the offender, attempting to change the sexual focus by initiating other topics of discussion. Eventually, these interactions ended as a result of victims' departure. Some victims ($n = 3$) agreed to offenders suggesting that they would expose their genitals via webcam; however, these victims did not comply with offenders' requests to engage in similar behaviours, and thereby refrained from this.

Only four victims in Cases 4 and 5 presented as compliant and engaged in online sexual activity in what appeared to be interactions of sexual experimentation. One of those victims disclosed to the offender that she was bisexual. Of particular note was one interaction in Case 5, in which the victim initiated the conversation in a very sexual way, which was followed by sexually explicit talk and behaviour. Initially believing himself to be communicating with a girl of a similar age, the victim then discovered that the offender was in fact male. However, the interaction continued in the same way, raising questions as to the victim's motivation for this. While several interactions appear to show young people engaging in what they believe to be safe sexual experimentation, this particular victim may

have been vulnerable as he acts in a rather indiscriminating manner, thereby displaying risky behaviour.

Three out of four victims in Case 1 engaged in conversations with the offender about a physical meeting. While in one instance this appeared to be related to a model shoot, all three victims were aware that if a meeting was to take place it would involve sexual activity. In particular, one interaction led to the arrangement of such a meeting, with the victim attending the arranged meeting point but the offender not appearing. Looking at the transcripts, the interactions within this case featured more of a relationship-building approach. It could therefore be argued that the victim perceived herself to be 'in love' with the offender and felt that a meeting was a natural next step in their relationship. Discussions of a physical meeting were also present across interactions in other cases. However, none of these progressed to any arrangements thereof. Such discussions may have therefore been part of a general pattern of sexual experimentation.

Gender differences

Interactions between the offender and male victims in Case 5 appeared to feature a more prominent interest in sexual topics and queries in relation to this by victims, including the use of pornography and experience of 'webcamming'. These male victims were also more likely to engage in sexually explicit conversation and acts than their female counterparts, believing that they were interacting with a girl of similar age.

Theme 4: Secrecy of contact

Some interactions ($n = 4$) in Cases 1 and 2 featured aspects of keeping contact between offenders and victims secret. It further became apparent through comments made by victims ($n = 2$) that they were secretly using the computer. The reasons for this can only be surmised, but may be related to night-time and/or allocation of a limited number of hours of allowed computer or Internet access by parents. Of particular interest was a request by the victim in Case 3 for the offender to change the profile picture on his private instant messaging provider account, stating that it would be safer. The reason for this cannot be deduced from the conversation, but it may show a certain awareness in the victim of the interaction being one of which his parents would disapprove.

Theme 5: Victim vulnerabilities

All victims were of an age younger than 16. Furthermore, the male victim in Case 3 was reported to suffer from an injury caused by an accident at birth, which led to severe psychological problems from which he has been suffering throughout his lifetime. Of particular concern was the victim in Case 2, who engaged in a range of highly sexually explicit talk and behaviours. There appeared to be a considerable dependence on the offender for positive feedback and encouragement, which may be suggestive of feelings of uncertainty and signs of a lack of both confidence and vulnerability. In relation to this, a clear progression and escalation could be seen in the level of compliance following extensive grooming by the offender, both in terms of engagement in more serious sexual acts and the increased immediacy of online sexual activity. Additionally, during conversations with the offender, the victim disclosed mental health issues and an incident of sexual

abuse, as well as interpersonal difficulties and/or problems with her stepfather. Overall, these findings provide evidence for the presence of a number of vulnerability factors in this victim, which may have initially led her to seek out personal contacts via Internet communication platforms, and undoubtedly serve as an explanation as to why she was particularly vulnerable to being approached by different offenders.

Discussion

The findings presented here provide new insights into the apparent behaviours engaged in and reactions displayed by victims as part of sexually exploitative interactions with offenders online. All victims accessed Internet communication platforms that are popular among young people, where they were approached by offenders, with some conversations being moved to private instant messaging providers once initial contact had been established. Similar to recent research (Whittle et al., 2014a, 2014b), the average age of victims in the present sample was 13, which highlights that adolescents younger than 14–17 (Mitchell et al., 2001) may also be approached by offenders via Internet communication platforms. Internet technologies play an increasingly important role in young people's everyday lives, which are not restricted to use by older adolescents.

Features of the formation of an online relationship could be seen in Cases 1 and 2, where the offender appeared to take on the role of a friend for victims, whom they shared facets of their lives and personal problems with, as well as sought advice from. Interactions between the offender and victim in Case 2 contained aspects that may be suggestive of the victim believing herself to be in a relationship with the offender, particularly in light of contact frequency and intensity. However, it is difficult to infer from the available data whether victims truly perceived to be in a relationship at any point in the interactions, as no explicit statements were made in relation to such a status.

In a study by Whittle et al. (2013), female victims considered offenders to be their boyfriend at least at some point during interactions, unlike male victims, who did not see the online contact as a relationship and were therefore not as enmeshed in it. Such feelings of enmeshment, as described by victims, also allowed offenders to advance the abuse more easily. Similarly, in interactions in Cases 1 and 2, in which offenders employed more of an indirect approach, featuring aspects of grooming, compliance by victims appeared to be greater, with a progression in online sexual activity clearly evident. This may have been further facilitated by romantic feelings towards offenders and their use of manipulative strategies (Eneman, Gillespie, & Stahl, 2010). Interactions between offenders and male victims, on the other hand, were of a shorter duration and appeared less intense, yet featured a more prominent interest in sexual topics. While the former may suggest differences in the needs female and male victims sought to fulfil via Internet communication platforms, the latter could be explained by findings reporting greater impulsivity among boys, differentially increased by less constrained familial environments (Chapple & Johnson, 2007).

Cases 3, 4, and 5 involved interactions that appeared to be more sexually explorative and experimentative in nature, with victims seemingly complying and participating therein out of curiosity (Choo, 2009; Lanning, 2010). This would be supported by findings that a great majority of young people use Internet communication platforms for sexual purposes (Quayle et al., 2012), and can at times be naïve to the risks. The observation

that victims in these cases rarely enquired about the age of offenders may suggest that they assumed to be communicating with someone of a similar age, potentially facilitating the engagement in some of the behaviours observed. While most victims across cases engaged in behaviours that would be referred to as risk-taking (i.e. sexually explicit talk, showing themselves via webcam), particularly those in Cases 4 and 5 were assertive in refusing to expose body parts nor engage in sexual behaviours via webcam. This is a positive observation that highlights protective responses by some young people in this sample in terms of having the ability and confidence to decide when to remove themselves from a situation that was becoming increasingly uncomfortable and/or risky.

Other victims displayed vulnerabilities that may explain their engagement in risk-taking behaviour. Vulnerability factors, such as relationship break-up, personal (Case 1) and mental health/psychological problems (Cases 2 and 3), were identified among some of the victims in the cases. In conversation with the offender in Case 4, a victim referred to her sexual orientation as bisexual. These factors represent risk factors that have previously been suggested to increase a victim's vulnerability to negative experiences online and offline (Mitchell et al., 2001, 2007). It could be argued that the victim who had suffered a relationship break-up sought comfort in meeting and talking to people online, with the Internet being used as a way of coping with feelings of sadness and loneliness (Quayle et al., 2012; Wolak et al., 2003). The victim in Case 3 may have turned to the Internet due to its anonymous nature to meet and interact with people while avoiding being judged in relation to his injury. For the victim in Case 4, Internet communication platforms may have provided a space to explore her sexuality.

Overall, although engagement in risk-taking behaviours was displayed by victims across cases, most discontinued conversations and interactions when they progressed to more extreme, sexually explicit requests by offenders. Some victims were resilient to offenders' approaches and knew how to deal with them effectively. Others were vulnerable for various reasons and appear to represent the more severe cases in the present sample. An important aspect is the acknowledgement of young people's motivation in their use of the Internet. It is suggested that the range of negative experiences by young people online should be viewed along a continuum, with sexual exploration/experimentation on one side and abuse following sexual grooming on the other. The use of the Internet by young people is varied, providing opportunities for different purposes. Those commonly referred to are in relation to identity, intimacy, self-expression, and development of friendships (Quayle et al., 2012; Subrahmanyam, Smahel, & Greenfield, 2006), which were evident across cases in this study. It is also possible that such behaviour has become an ordinary part of adolescent development, particularly for young people who are more advanced developmentally (Sevčíková, Vazsonyi, Sirůček, & Konečný, 2013).

In terms of Internet safety education, Finkelhor (2014) argues that a more generic education about life skills (i.e. conflict management, empathy promotion, emotional regulation, consequence anticipation, refusal techniques, bystander mobilisation, and help-seeking) rather than specialised Internet safety training may be the most effective prevention. Strikingly, some victims in this sample successfully used such skills to rebut advances by offenders, which suggest that incorporating them in current Internet safety education programmes may prove to be effective for more children. Concurrently, acknowledging young people's developmentally appropriate interest in sexual content and active

participation therein may represent a more helpful approach to dealing with such cases and their consequences (Quayle et al., 2012).

Limitations and future directions

The present study employed a qualitative approach on a small number of cases due to the highly sensitive nature of the data and the extreme difficulty in accessing this kind of material. While the number of transcripts the cases comprised of was appropriate for the methodology used, findings are tentative and should be interpreted with caution. Restrictions surrounding confidentiality issues prevented the presentation of victims' contributions in their interactions with offenders. While we attempted to provide the most inclusive description possible of these contributions, we acknowledge that this may represent a limitation to the validity of the findings. Future research would significantly benefit from a detailed analysis of both offenders' and victims' contributions to provide a realistic account of the dynamics involved in sexually exploitative interactions online. It is suggested that this type of analysis would further our understanding of the sequencing of behaviour and responses, as well as offenders' potential adaptations of their modus operandi based on victims' initial responses to their approaches.

Notes

1. For a more detailed description of the methodology used in the present study, please see Kloess et al. (2015).
2. Offenders employed either an indirect or a direct approach to conversations with victims and initiating contact with them, which was also reflected in the types of strategies they used. Offenders of an indirect approach engaged in aspects of sexual grooming (a manipulative process whereby offenders prepare a child for abuse, Craven, Brown, & Gilchrist, 2006); interactions of a direct approach lacked features of sexual grooming altogether.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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